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WHAT IS RELIGION?

BY FRANK SARGENT HOFFMAN, PROFESSOR OF PHILOSOPHY IN
UNION COLLEGE.

No one at all acquainted with the tendencies of thought at present can fail to be impressed with the greatly increased interest now being taken in the study of religion. Thinkers of every shade of opinion upon other subjects are fast coming to recognize the fact that religion has always held a vitally important place in the development of every race and individual, and, whether we like it or not, is certain to remain a most potent factor in the civilization of the future.

For a number of years the most persistent efforts have been put forth by a small army of able investigators to find out the actual facts of man's religious life in all times and countries. Not only have the sacred books and rites of the nations of the earth been subjected to the most rigid scrutiny, but the folklore of all lands and even the crudest superstitions and most repulsive practices of savages have been carefully studied. Every possible means has been taken to discover what ideas man has had in all conditions of his existence concerning the powers that rule over this universe, and also to determine to what extent these ideas have affected his thought and life.

But nothing is more apparent in this awakened interest in the subject of religion than that the old view of what constitutes religion has undergone, in some respects at least, an actual revolution. The narrow sectarian position of a generation ago has been shown to be wholly untenable; and religion, instead of being the possible acquisition of a few, we now see reaches its roots deep down into the very subsoil of humanity, and cannot help giving itself some sort of expression, for good or for ill, in the experiences of every individual. Hence the chief inquiry

of our time on this subject is not any longer whether a man has any religion, but whether the religion that he does have is of any real value; whether it is a help or a hindrance to his own progress and the ultimate triumph of truth and right.

But before this question can properly be taken into consideration, we must make a careful scrutiny of another, namely, what exactly is to be meant by religion? On this point there is still great confusion, and in the present state of the study of religion no need is more imperative than to have this confusion cleared away, or at least reduced to a minimum.

We may be greatly helped to the attainment of this end by observing in the first place that religion is not to be confounded with religions. Religion is that out of which different forms of religion grow or develop. It stands related to religions about as the first man stands related to the whole human race. It is the germ or principle which lies at the foundation of all religions and out of which they all proceed.

No error can be greater than to begin our present investigation with such a definition of religion as excludes by its very terms all other religions than the one that we ourselves most approve. This error is not an uncommon one among writers on the subject even in our own day. A distinguished Oxford professor, Sir Monier Monier-Williams, recently maintained that "a religion, in the proper sense of the word, must postulate the existence of one living and true God of infinite power, wisdom and love, the Creator and Designer and Preserver of all things visible and invisible," besides other doctrines which he specified. Then he proceeded to exclude at once Buddhism from the list of religions as "no religion at all." Manifestly, a definition of religion should have in it what is applicable to all forms of religion from the lowest to the highest, and not merely what is true only of one.

In the second place, religion should not be identified with a belief in the existence of superhuman spirits. We are not here concerned with the question as to whether the first known variety of religion actually took on this form. It may be admitted at once, however, that most of the religions now current in the world do make a great deal of this belief. But what we maintain is that if the belief should turn out to be unfounded, religion would not be destroyed thereby.

It was formerly held that the wind is an immaterial spirit; that the sun, moon and stars are gods and goddesses, with their own separate ambitions and whims; that the tides ebb and flow, and that plants grow and decay in direct obedience to spiritual powers. But everybody at all acquainted with the physical science of to-day is, of course, well aware of the fact that no such supernatural beings exist, and that these objects and their activities are satisfactorily accounted for on quite other grounds.

The untutored savage, when he awakes from a dream, believes that he has been away on a journey, or that other people have visited him. But as he takes it for granted that his body does not make these excursions, he naturally concludes that his phantom or image makes them; and when he beholds his shadow on the ground or sees it reflected on still water, he naturally infers that his double self is following him about. But no psychologist of to-day would, of course, admit the validity of such an explanation for these or any similar mental states that might come within the range of human experience.

The realm of alleged superhuman spirits is constantly being lessened by modern research, and we have no way of telling at present where exactly this lessening process is going to end. Our point is that it is immaterial to our inquiry after the essential thing in religion as to where it does end. Many existing varieties of religion may have to go as many have gone already, but religion will remain. The doctrine of the existence or non-existence of superhuman spirits is not fundamental to its continuance.

One of the ablest advocates of this view of religion is Professor E. B. Tylor. In his "Primitive Culture" (Vol. I, pp. 424-5), after very properly insisting that the first requisite in a systematic study of the religions of primitive men is to lay down a rudimentary definition, he proceeds to criticise those generally in vogue. He finds the chief error of them all to consist in identifying religion with particular developments, rather than with the deeper motive which underlies them, and concludes by saying, "It seems best to fall back at once on this essential source, and simply to claim as a minimum definition of religion the belief in Spiritual Beings."

Now it is admitted that this belief may be a characteristic of all primitive religions; and, if we were merely treating of the

history of religion, we might find this definition of much use. But we are looking for the germ or common principle of all religions, and that is something for which this conception of religion does not adequately suffice.

Again, we should not regard religion as primarily resting upon a belief in human immortality. Even so great a philosopher as Kant maintains that, "Without a belief in a future life no religion can be conceived to exist"; and John Fiske in his very helpful book, "Through Nature to God," asserts that the "belief in the unseen world in which human beings continue to exist after death" is essential to religion. Both these thinkers forget that the early Jewish religion was without such belief, and that in many religions where it does exist it forms no important part of either belief or practice. Among the ancient Greeks immortality meant the immortality of the family or state rather than that of the individual.

In many religions whole classes are formally excluded from it, and the doctrine is by no means universally held to-day. As Howerth well says in a recent article (*"Internat. Jour. of Ethics,"* January, 1903, p. 190): "What has the conception of immortality to do with the religious philosophy of those who hold, with the late Professor Huxley, that religion is reverence and love for the ethical ideal, and the desire to realize that ideal in life? or with that of the philosopher Herbart, who considered sympathy with the universal dependence of men as the essential natural principle of religion?"

Important as this doctrine may be to some conceptions of the ultimate nature of the universe, religion would not perish if it should turn out to be erroneous. For what may happen in eternity cannot be the determining cause of the existence of a thing here and now. If the doctrine of conditional immortality, advocated by so many in our day, should become a general view, the universal acceptance of the doctrine would not annihilate religion. The idea of immortality cannot, therefore, be regarded as its final basis or ground.

Nor can we clear up this subject of religion by making it primarily dependent upon the belief in one personal God. This belief is, to be sure, the dominant form of thought on the subject of religion in all civilized lands, and that much must be admitted in its favor. But by holding to this as a satisfactory

definition of religion we would exclude the vast majority of the human race from the category of religious beings. For many maintain that no primitive races have this idea, and the Buddhist religion with its almost untold number of adherents teaches just the opposite doctrine. Of course we are not concerning ourselves with the truthfulness or the value of this belief. Our only contention now is that those who deny this doctrine do not destroy religion.

What man in history was ever more sincerely religious to the very core of his being than the philosopher Spinoza? His whole life was devoted to the advocacy of the doctrine that the only thing in this world worth striving for was to love and know God. "Our salvation," he says, "or blessedness, or liberty, consists in a constant, or eternal, love towards God." Yet he distinctly and deliberately rejected the personality of God as wholly out of harmony with a sound philosophy. Nature, or the World-Force, was the object of his reverence and love.

As a matter of fact, belief in the existence of many gods has been far more prevalent in the history of mankind than the belief in one. Suppose polytheism should ultimately prevail over all lands, or pantheism should become the universal doctrine. That would not do away with the existence of religion. It would only be changing its form of manifestation.

If the positions already taken are sound, we have gone far enough to see that religion in the truest and most profound sense of the term is not primarily dependent upon any specific set of beliefs. It does not rise and fall with these beliefs, or go out of existence if they cease to be. The greatest variety of beliefs have been held by the religious leaders of the world from Confucius and Zoroaster and Socrates down to our time and country, but few, if any, specific articles of belief are taught by them in common. No one of the creeds, even among Christians, is established beyond critical investigation, and many of them may yet be set aside or at least greatly modified by advancing thought.

E. Ritchie, after a very satisfactory discussion of the relation of creeds to religion in a late number of the "*Philosophical Review*" (January, 1901), clearly states the true position in these words: "We must conclude, then, that there is no particular belief as to what the ultimate reality of things is, or as

to man's relation to that reality, which is either essential to, or incompatible with, the possession of religion." This position does not imply, however, that religion has nothing at all to do with belief; for the opposite is true, as we shall see a little later.

Nor are we to find the ultimate ground of religion in some particular feeling or set of feelings. In the system of the famous theologian, Schleiermacher, religion was regarded as neither a knowing nor a doing, but a feeling; and it was made to rest fundamentally on "a feeling of absolute dependence." Several able, modern writers seem to hold this view, of whom Professor Lester H. Ward may be taken as an example. In an able article (in the "*Internat. Jour. of Ethics*," January, 1898), he says: "It is this sense of helplessness before the majesty of the environment which, if it is not religion itself, is the foundation upon which all religion is based." The error here is not in holding that religion has to do with feeling, but in maintaining that it is grounded primarily on feeling alone. For it is psychologically untrue to fact that any human feeling springs up of itself. It is always preceded by some act of knowing of at least some degree of clearness and force.

Finally, for the negative side of our inquiry, religion is not primarily a doing. It is not based alone upon the will. There are no acts the performing of which makes a man religious. Even "being good and doing good," though a good thing in itself, will not account for religion. Nor is it adequately defined as obedience to the commandments of God or as the subjection of our fallible wills to a higher will. All these positions contain an element of truth; but they do not lead us to the essence of religion as in the light of modern knowledge it ought to be considered. The apostle James was evidently not speaking of the ultimate foundations of religion, but of a local and temporal condition, when he made pure and undefiled religion to consist of this: "to visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep himself unspotted from the world."

We must look for a satisfactory definition of religion, therefore, not to any specific belief, or kind of feeling, or set of voluntary acts, but to the whole of man as a knowing, feeling and willing being. We should not identify religion with any one of these three kinds of mental phenomena, but with them all. The

psychology of to-day teaches that these phenomena in all probability never occur separately; that the unit of consciousness includes in some measure the activity of all three. Every act of perception is accompanied by a feeling, and every feeling by an act of will. Nor can the order of their occurrence be changed. Every volition is preceded by a feeling, and every feeling by some sensation or intellectual act. Pfeiderer is right when he insists that in every religious act the whole personality participates.

Hence a correct definition of religion must be determined by the way we put these three elements together. Our problem is a problem in psychology. It is not in the study of theology or ethnology, but of this science that we shall find the data for the proper solution of it. Religion exists because man exists. It grows up out of the normal development of his powers, and in trying to define it no basal element in his nature should be left out of account.

Religion shows itself just as soon as man has developed beyond the mere satisfaction of his animal appetites and begins to exercise his higher powers. There is a partial truth at least in Professor Ward's position that "religion is the substitute in the rational world for instinct in the subrational." No new-born babe or full-grown idiot has any religion, but every normally developed human being has. Whenever a man knows enough to distinguish the outside world from himself, and tries to act in accordance with this knowledge, he begins to be religious.

The first element, therefore, in religion is the recognition of the existence of a power not ourselves pervading the universe. And another is the endeavor to put ourselves in harmonious relation with this power. Of course the feeling or affective element is presupposed as coming in between the other two. For without it the endeavor would lack a motive, and could therefore have no existence whatsoever. Every sane man believes, at least, that he is only a fraction of the sum-total of things. He also feels some dependence upon this sum-total, and he is obliged to put himself in some sort of accord with it. This is what Caird has condensed into the statement, "A man's religion is the expression of his ultimate attitude to the universe" ("Evolution of Religion," Vol. I, p. 30).

Every growing man is continually changing in some degree

his conception of the universe and the mysterious power that it manifests, but at no time in his career does he arrive at a final and completed conception of it. This is due, of course, to the fact that his experience is limited and can never be anything else. One of the greatest reflections upon a man's character in this age, when so much is being added to our knowledge of the universe, is that his views about religion never change.

Still, we must not forget that religion is a great permanent reality. It is not something that comes to-day and goes to-morrow. So long as man endures, it will endure; and as man advances it will grow in importance and power.

Here we need to note the fact that the permanence and reality of religion can never be affected in the least by the teachings of any science. For science is only one of man's imperfect ways of looking at his knowledge. It can never make or break any reality. Religion was in the world long before any of the sciences came into being, and it will stay here whatever may be their future development.

For science is a means to an end, and when the end is attained, when a perfect comprehension of the truth, such as we might suppose a god to possess, is arrived at, there will be no need of science. But so long as man remains finite, science will have a great deal to do with the various forms of religion that from time to time make their appearance in history. For it is the business of science to investigate and criticise all kinds of beliefs, and particularly all beliefs that are proposed for the acceptance of mankind concerning the nature and attributes of the supreme power that pervades the universe. Not infrequently science has had to combat with vigor such beliefs, for they have often been out of all accord with carefully ascertained truth.

At certain periods in the past the greatest enemy of religion has been theology, and in certain localities this is the case at present. For theology is almost always the last science to yield to the incoming of new truths. But whatever may be the teachings of theology or any other science, the essential thing in religion is not destroyed thereby. The germ is always present, and is growing with some degree of vigor and bearing some kind of fruit.

If the view of religion taken above be correct, we are led to the observation that every man is by nature religious, and unless

he twists his growth out of its normal course of development he will always remain so. Irreligion is not the state or condition of having no religion at all. It is rebellion against what one really believes to be the best religion, and the setting up of some inferior religion in its stead. Every sane man must have a god of some sort. He is so made that he must worship something. He must put something over and above himself and pay that something homage. Modern students of the subject of religion are now everywhere admitting the great truth contained in the statement of the ancient Psalmist that only a fool can say in his heart, "There is no God." They are willing to go much farther and accept without hesitation the recent assertion of President Eliot of Harvard, that the true test of any man's progress in civilization is his idea of God.

FRANK SARGENT HOFFMAN.